

# Uncovering an Indiana Treasure . . .

## Carl Fisher



Anyone who has visited the famed, Indianapolis Motor Speedway, knows about the magnificent races that take place on that storied oval. The world's largest single day sporting event, the "Indianapolis 500," is held at the Speedway every May. This "Greatest Spectacle in Racing" now shares the track with other races, including NASCAR's "Brickyard 400" and Formula One's "United States Grand Prix." However, few who visit the track today know about the man whose vision it was to create that two-and-a-half mile oval of bricks in a corn field. His name was Carl Fisher.

Carl was the second son of Albert H. and Ida Graham Fisher. He was born on January 12, 1874 in Greensburg, Indiana. Fisher's parents separated when he was a boy, and his mother moved the family to Indianapolis. As a child, Carl experienced attention and concentration problems in school. This was probably a result of his extreme nearsightedness that wasn't corrected until later in life. School did not hold much appeal for the youngster; consequently, he had quit by the age of 12 and started to work in a grocery store.

Fisher held several jobs in his early life including co-owning a bicycle shop with his brothers and eventually a car dealership. However, it was his promotional stunts that started him down the road to fame and success. One of his most renowned feats was to fly a full-size Stoddard-Dayton automobile over Indianapolis by hot air balloon. This "same car" was then driven back into town amidst cheers from the public. However, what wasn't revealed - the car that actually floated over Indy was missing its engine, and the car that was driven back into town was a duplicate.

Fisher's fortune, however, was not made in the selling of cars. In 1904, He purchased the patent for compressed gas automobile headlights from a man by the name of Percy Avery. The Prest-O-Lite company was formed with help from Fisher's friend, James Allison. Soon their firm was supplying headlights to almost every automobile manufacturer in the United States. By 1913, Prest-O-Lite was doing so well it was sold to the Union Carbide Company for the sum of \$9 million.

Prior to the sale of Prest-O-Lite and continuing after, Fisher started using the money that he made from the company to invest in other ventures. In 1909, the same year that he married fifteen-year-old, Jane Watts, he conceived the idea of creating a proving ground where cars could be tested and raced. At this time, Indiana was a leading center of the automobile industry, with more companies based within its borders than any other state. Fisher, along with his friends, James Allison, Arthur Newby, and Frank Wheeler, contributed \$250,000 in capital to form the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Company. They transformed the Pressley Farm on Indianapolis' Westside into a two-and-a-half-mile crushed stone and tar oval.

The first automobile race at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway took place on August 19, 1909 with disastrous results. The surface could not handle the cars on the track. It broke apart causing some serious accidents that killed six people - including a couple of spectators. The race was officially stopped with only 235 of the 300 projected miles completed.

Fisher convinced Newby to pay for resurfacing the track with 3.2 million ten-pound bricks. This would create a relatively smooth and durable surface, and “The Brickyard” was born. The first 500-mile race would take place on Memorial Day, 1911 with Ray Harroun as the winner. He drove an Indianapolis-made Marmon Wasp with an average speed of 74.59 miles per hour.

Fisher’s experience with “road surfaces” aided him well in two of his next ventures: “The Lincoln Highway,” America’s first transcontinental highway - spanning from New York to San Francisco, and also “The Dixie Highway,” which connected Chicago and Miami. Fisher was integral in promoting both projects and getting them funded.

By 1912, Fisher and his wife had purchased a vacation home on Biscayne Bay near the city of Miami, Florida. Miami Beach was to be Fisher’s next big project. He would turn a mangrove swamp into a vacation paradise. His vision for Miami Beach was one of luxurious hotels and homes for the wealthy that would rise out of the wetlands. In fact, he actually poured sand from the ocean floor to provide some beach areas. From 1920 - 1925, the Miami Beach area grew 440%, and Fisher’s fortune was estimated to be at least \$100 million.

Unfortunately, the end of Fisher’s fortune began as he divorced his wife Jane in 1926. That same year, he began work on his dream of “The Miami Beach of the North,” at Montauk on Long Island’s eastern tip. Like Miami Beach, Fisher constructed some grand facilities including a large hotel, casino and yacht club. In 1927, a hurricane hit Miami and nearly wiped out Miami Beach. Tourism dropped drastically which in turn affected Fisher’s Miami revenues. Since he had borrowed heavily against his Miami assets to fund Montauk, Fisher was now faced with owing more than what he was worth. In order to satisfy his bondholders, he sold his interests in the Indianapolis Motor Speedway to World War I flying ace and former race car driver, Eddie Rickenbacker. He even sold off his Miami Beach hotels, homes, yachts, land and his own home. The Great Depression started in 1929 and only served to further Fisher’s fall into total bankruptcy by 1932.

Carl G. Fisher died of a gastric hemorrhage on July 15, 1939 in Miami Beach. He had been living alone in a small house with an estimated net worth of only \$55,000. He was cremated and his urn stayed in Miami until 1943, where it was then moved to the Fisher mausoleum in Crown Hill Cemetery, Indianapolis.

### **Additional Resources:**

*Carl Fisher-Architect of Montauk.* Montauk-Online.com, 2000. [www.montauklife.com/fisher.html](http://www.montauklife.com/fisher.html)

Fisher, Jane Watts. *Fabulous Hoosier: A story of American Achievement, by Jane Fisher.* New York: R. M. McBride & Company, 1947.

Fisher, Jerry M. *The Pacesetter: The Untold Story of Carl G. Fisher.* Ft. Bragg, CA: Lost Coast Press, 1998.

Foster, Mark S. *Castles in the Sand: The Life and Times of Carl Graham Fisher.* Gainesville, FL: University press of Florida, 2000.

*The Hoosier, Barnum: Carl G. Fisher.* Indiana Historical Society, 2000.

[www.indianahistory.org/heritage/fisher.html](http://www.indianahistory.org/heritage/fisher.html)

*Mr. Miami Beach.* Videocassette. Dir. Mark J. Davis, PBS Home Video, 1998 (MLA) 60 min.

***Carl Fisher Image courtesy of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum***